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The cabinet of curiosities, or collection of the exotic and the obscure, was a product of the Renaissance. Efforts by the elite to acquire and display natural and man-made marvels served a dual purpose: to illustrate prestige and to support intellectual pursuits. In regard to the latter, this paper suggests three uses of the Renaissance cabinet: as a refuge, conducive to creativity and critical thinking; as a laboratory, facilitating experimentation via the arrangement or observation of objects; and as a forum, to inspire intellectual conversation. Linking the historical cabinet to its contemporary counterparts, this paper examines similar attributes in three modern exhibits on display, or displayed, at the University of Colorado Boulder, the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, and the Canadian Museum of Civilization. It concludes that the cabinet of curiosities remains a relevant model for exhibit design, that the appeal of the unexpected is timeless.

Headings:

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THE CABINET OF CURIOSITIES: RECREATING THE RENAISSANCE EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

The keeping of a cabinet of curiosities, or collection of unique and obscure items, emerged as a scholarly pursuit during the Renaissance. Widespread efforts to gather oddities and to make associations between objects collectively underpinned a greater understanding of the world. The most spectacular cabinets, testaments to the prestige and world-reach of their elite owners, would come to supply Europe's first museums. Whereas the Renaissance cabinet had attempted to encompass the world in its entirety, the late eighteenth-century museum acted on advances in knowledge by separating fields and developing specialized displays. Contemporary institutions have, by and large, continued in the latter tradition.

This paper explores the role of cabinets of curiosities in facilitating the creation of knowledge. Furthermore, it aims to address the question: can modern museums draw on past practices to inspire and educate their patrons? If so, how? A review of relevant literature suggests three primary functions of the Renaissance cabinet: to provide a refuge or sanctuary for the individual, to serve as a laboratory for drawing connections, and to facilitate conversation around objects within the collection. This paper will trace these uses in history and offer three modern museum exhibits as examples of contemporary cabinets. A consideration of such trends in exhibit design will lend itself to conclusions on the future of this mode of display.

Cabinet as Sanctuary

In Renaissance Italy, the cabinet of curiosities coexisted with the private study. The purpose of the studiolo, as this chamber was called, was to provide refuge from the outside world. Here, an individual could immerse himself in private contemplation or meditation. As eloquently described by Florentine political philosopher, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527):

“When evening comes, I return home and go into my study. On the threshold I strip off my muddy, sweaty, workday clothes, and put on the robes of court and palace, and in this graver dress I enter the antique courts of the ancients and am welcomed by them, and there I taste the food that alone is mine, and for which I was born. And there I make bold to speak to them and ask the motives of their actions, and they, in their humanity, reply to me. And for the space of four hours I forget the world, remember no vexation, fear poverty no more, tremble no more at death: I pass indeed into their world.”¹

In contrast to the notion of the cabinet as it existed (or would come to exist) elsewhere in Europe, the studiolo was adorned primarily with images. Art covered the walls from floor to ceiling, portraying historical figures and family members among other subjects. Federico da Montefeltro’s (1422-1482) studiolo, still intact at the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino, is a notable example of such a space (Appendix, Figures 1 and 2). The lower portion of the room is lined by panels of inlaid wood, several of which depict collection cabinets. Objects associated with learning can be observed through open latticework doors: a variety of books, an armillary sphere, an astrolabe, and writing instruments. Above, portraits of influential figures lend an air of solemnity and power to

¹ Machiavelli, quoted in Christine Davenne, *Cabinets of Wonder* (New York: Abrams, 2012), 57.

the setting. By design, Italian studioli captured the link between art and science as well as that between the past and the present. As alluded to by Machiavelli, these crossroads fostered an atmosphere conducive to critical thinking and creativity.

Physical collections were soon added to the studiolo, often in adjoining rooms. Isabella d'Este (1474-1539), one of the few women to maintain a cabinet, stored her collection in a grotto directly below her private study. Among these sixteen hundred objects were purported unicorn horns, a porphyry table, carved gemstones, and a variety of Roman antiquities. Also notable in regard to layout is the studiolo of Francesco I de'Medici (1541-1587). A visitor to this chamber would admire the elaborately painted wall panels, unaware that the allegorical depictions of the liberal arts and the muses alluded to the curiosities (which included artifacts collected in India and the Americas) housed in secret rooms behind the pictorial displays (Appendix, Figures 3 and 4). On the surface, the room flaunted the interests and influence of the owner. That objects were hidden by design underscores the notion that collections were for the private use of the owner and select associates.

Cabinet as Laboratory

As expressed by art historian Hans Ulrich Obrist, “to make a collection is to find, acquire, organize and store items... It is also, inevitably, a way of thinking about the world—the connections and principles that produce a collection contain assumptions, juxtapositions, findings, experimental possibilities and associations.”² That objects have meaning and that arranging them is a way of creating knowledge are notions rooted in Renaissance thought. Through this lens, the cabinet of curiosities may aptly be characterized as a laboratory; a place where an individual could explore and test ideas through collecting and arranging.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the efforts of European collectors were guided by the desire to assemble a microcosm, or world in miniature. To compensate for the practical impossibility of this task, the world was reimagined as the sum of two parts: *naturalia* (natural specimens) and *arteficialia* (man-made products, including those of indigenous origin). This generalization of the world not only enabled individuals to collect according to personal interest, but promoted a fluidity of thought in terms of the interpretation and organization of objects.

Among the most highly sought curiosities in the realm of *naturalia* were those perceived as ambiguous, or as blurring the boundaries of nature. The mandrake root, for example, with its similarities to the human form, blurred the distinction between plant and animal. Corals and fossils were likewise appealing as a seeming cross between plant

² Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Ways of Curating* (New York: Faber and Faber Inc., 2014), 39.

or animal and mineral. The bezoar, or stone found within the human or animal body, held extra appeal as an object purported to have magical properties: it was widely believed that this stone could counteract any poison. The inclusion in cabinets of fantastical specimens such as unicorn horns, mermaids, and basilisks, has often “been held up as evidence of over-credulousness on the part of collectors and their audiences.”³ As suggested by historian Arthur MacGregor, however, “they should [instead] be regarded as rather transparent counterfeits of nature, designed to intrigue and vex rather than to deceive.”⁴

Objects which appealed to the mind were also sought in the realm of *arteficialia*. Expressed in broad strokes, collectors sought items which exhibited technicality (such as complex lathe-turned works) or microscopic detail (like engraved gemstones). Tools, themselves, were also highly collectable, representing the application of mathematical principles to a process or, simply, the skill and knowledge required to transform raw materials into art. As was the case with *naturalia*, the obscure and the exotic were highly prized. To this end, artifacts from indigenous tribes (including weaponry, relics, and clothing) were popular among collectors.

. . .

As a physical space, the cabinet of curiosities often resembled an apothecary’s shop (this is unsurprising as many collectors were associated with the profession). Tiers of shelves, banks of drawers or open cubby holes, and a narrow counter or other workspace were common features of this laboratory. The cabinet of Francesco Calzolari

³ Arthur MacGregor. *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 46.

⁴ MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment*, 47.

(1566-1586), an apothecary in Verona, is archetypal in this regard (Appendix, Figure 5). The organization of objects *within* a cabinet naturally varied by collector and collection. It may be said, however, that modes of arrangement acknowledged the existence of multiple perspectives on ordering the world.

Divisions between *naturalia* and *arteficialia* are indistinct in the cabinet of Ferdinando Cospi (1606-1686), a nobleman of Bologna (Appendix, Figure 6). Take for example a case on the lower left of the center which houses a book, a bow and arrow set, a human-like figurine, and coral. What to modern eyes appears haphazard instead reflects the fluidity of Renaissance thought. In essence, an object does not belong to a single classification but several, which are intertwined. The emphasis on blurred boundaries and hidden links thus enables the collector to model his own thoughts without imposing a set interpretation on his guest. This viewer in turn observes the assembly of objects, free to draw his own conclusions on the relationships between them.

As the act of arranging facilitated critical thinking, so too did the study of individual objects. Popular thought linked observation, in particular, to the creation of knowledge. During the Renaissance, naturalists re-assessed the botanical and zoological writings of the ancients (Aristotle and Pliny the Elder, for example) by drawing information directly from the source. Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605), a professor at the University of Bologna, was one such collector. In his multi-volume work, *General Natural History of Animals*, Aldrovandi details the habitats, diets, and techniques for capturing different animals as well as their culinary attributes, medicinal uses, and symbolic or mythological significance. The inclusion of the final category marks this work as a product of its time. A penchant for the fantastic yields entries such as this on

the stingray: “it can harm whoever attempts to attack it by injecting a powerful poison. It enjoys music, dance, and clever talk.”⁵ In full, however, the *General Natural History of Animals* was one of many Renaissance efforts to see firsthand, to make connections, and to offer new ideas.

A product of observation, illustration was promoted as a means to capture what text could not. In fact, a precise drawing was an acceptable stand in for a specimen in a collection. The cabinet of Ferrante Imperato (1550-1625) of Naples demonstrates the appeal and importance of such drawings. As pictured in the engraving (Appendix, Figure 7), the left-hand shelves are packed with large volumes, most lying flat. While some may be books, most are likely portfolios of drawings and herbaria (preserved plant specimens).⁶ The proliferation of illustration during the Renaissance provided a foundation to be built upon by eighteenth century scientists. The detail depicted in renderings of botanical specimens in particular indicated the existence of such taxonomic relationships as would be described by Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778).⁷

⁵ Davenne, *Cabinets of Wonder*, 92.

⁶ As suggested by MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment*, 22.

⁷ Davenne, *Cabinets of Wonder*, 85.

Cabinet as Conversation

Naturally, the keeping of a cabinet thrust collectors into conversation with others, be they the merchants or explorers who furnished specimens and artifacts or the fellow intellectuals who shared similar interests. In regard to the latter, the cabinet provided a stage for comparison, for debate, and ultimately for the advancement of knowledge. The power of collections to facilitate this interaction is illustrated by the exchange between Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) and the French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, better known as the Count de Buffon (1707-1788).

Thomas Jefferson, a figure noted for his myriad of interests, was an enthusiastic collector. Visitors to his home at Monticello often remarked on the collections displayed within the large entry hall. As articulated by Boston law student George Ticknor in 1815:

“You enter, by a glass folding-door, into a hall...on one side hang the head and horns of an elk, a deer, and a buffalo; another is covered with curiosities which Lewis and Clarke found in their wild and perilous expedition. On the third, among many other striking matters, was the head of a mammoth, or, as Cuvier calls it, a mastodon, containing the only *os frontis*, Mr. Jefferson tells me, that has yet been found. On the fourth side, in odd union with a fine painting of the Repentance of Saint Peter, is an Indian map on leather, of the southern waters of the Missouri, and an Indian representation of a bloody battle, handed down in their traditions.”⁸

These objects reflect Jefferson’s long held passion for natural history and Native American culture, subjects on which he had clashed with Buffon.

⁸ Ticknor, quoted in Joyce Henri Robinson "An American Cabinet of Curiosities: Thomas Jefferson's 'Indian Hall at Monticello'," *Winterthur Portfolio* 30, no.1 (Spring 1995): 47.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the Count de Buffon was one of Europe's leading naturalists; his multi-volume *Histoire Naturelle* was published to great acclaim. Through sweeping descriptions of Old and New World species, Buffon presented a theory of American degeneracy. The unfavorably wet and humid climate of the Americas, he claimed, produced species which were smaller in size and less vigorous than their Old World counterparts. According to Buffon, the Americas had no creature as magnificent as the lion; the closest equivalent to an elephant being a tapir one sixth of its size. His argument of degeneracy even encompassed people, both native and immigrant.

To Jefferson, this theory was not only degrading but a threat to the commercial interests of the new United States. His first and only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (originally published in Paris in 1785), was written in part to refute Buffon's claims. In a lengthy chapter dedicated to addressing the theory of degeneracy, Jefferson presents statistical evidence to demonstrate the similarity in measurement of animals indigenous to both Europe and America (including bear, deer, and fox). He follows with an analysis of species unique to the Old World and New: by his count, eighteen belonged to Europe and seventy-four to the Americas.

In a concurrent effort to convince Buffon of his error, Jefferson arranged for physical specimens to be shipped directly to France. Neither a panther skin nor mastodon bones, however, persuaded the Count to reconsider his opinion on degeneracy. Undeterred, Jefferson organized a grand undertaking to procure a moose (which Buffon had classified as a small reindeer) to present to his adversary. As eloquently described by biologist Lee Alan Dugatkin:

The hunt for this moose, and the attempt to get it shipped to Jefferson, and then to Buffon in Paris, is the stuff of movies. The plotline involved teams of twenty men hauling a giant dead moose through miles of snow and frozen forests, a carcass falling apart in transit, antlers that didn't quite belong to the body of the moose but could be 'fixed on at pleasure,' crates lost in transit, irresponsible shippers, and a despondent Jefferson thinking all hope of receiving this critical piece of evidence was lost. Eventually, though, the seven-foot-tall stuffed moose made it to Jefferson, and then to Buffon."⁹

This anecdote captures the zeal of collectors and the centrality of objects to scientific (and political) conversation. The importance attached to objects as evidence indicates their value to intellectual circles. Buffon died in 1788, just months after the moose's arrival in Paris. It is, however, apparent that he was able to study the specimen. In a letter to Jefferson he "promised in his next volume to set things right."¹⁰ Sadly, there would be no revision of *Histoire Naturelle* and the debate on American degeneracy would be taken up by the next generation.

⁹ Lee Alan Dugatkin, *Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose: Natural History in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), xi-xii.

¹⁰ Quoted in Dugatkin, *Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose*, 100. Dugatkin notes that it is unclear whether Buffon was simply convinced that the moose and the reindeer were different species, or that he now rejected his theory of degeneracy.

Rise of the Modern Museum

In addition to representing Jefferson's own interests, the collections displayed at Monticello were intended to reflect the splendor of America. This desire to promote the potential of the United States matched concurrent European efforts to validate new political and social systems. Collecting, a means of establishing identity and prestige, became an activity which obsessed European nations. As had been the case for the Renaissance collector, artifacts and specimens amassed in new national collections dually expressed "belonging to a worthy and educated club and of being individually distinctive."¹¹

The resulting modern, or public, museums were initially supplied with objects from private cabinets. Embracing the role of 'the people' as owners of and contributors to collections, these institutions soon welcomed the participation of the educated middle classes. Scientific and philosophical societies, in particular, were encouraged to collect specimens, artifacts, and items of interest on behalf of the museum. During the nineteenth century, an overabundance of objects and information led curators to embrace specialized categorizations as a means of rationalizing selections for display. Broadly, classification was based on an item's age or date of creation, region of origin, and type. The development of academic disciplines and sub-disciplines (such as paleontology and Egyptology) added complexities to the existing scheme and further refined decisions on

¹¹ Sharon Macdonald, "Collecting Practices," in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 85.

the organization, depiction, and acquisition of objects. Unlike the cabinet which celebrated fluidity, the museum came to be associated with precision.

Since the late twentieth century, the effects of strict categorization have been questioned by museum professionals dissatisfied with the status quo. As described by Susan Macdonald, “In many museums, a gap had opened up between collecting and exhibition. A growing lack of confidence in the pedagogic potency of objects – both in themselves and as part of collections – led to increasing use of exhibitions based on ‘stories’ or ‘narratives’ rather than collections, and these used dioramas or text panels as the main structuring device, with objects only as illustration.”¹² Narrative-based display had been adopted as a means of educating the public; the rigid structure ensured the audience came away with ‘the facts’. Yet, underlying an exhibit of this design are unspoken questions: who created the exhibit and for what purpose? What groups does the narrative empower or disempower? Are there other contexts in which the subject should be considered? As current trends in education promote critical and independent thinking, it is reasonable to suggest the museum follow suit. Re-centering objects in an exhibition, and the revival of curiosity as a lens for interpretation, is a means to this end.

¹² Macdonald, “Collecting Practices,” 88.

Recreating the Cabinet

The BioLounge at the Museum of Natural History, University of Colorado Boulder, late 2008-present

The BioLounge occupies the lowest level of the Museum of Natural History at the University of Colorado Boulder. Inspired by “the look and feel” of old cabinets of curiosities, the lounge features old-fashioned furniture grouped around antique display cabinets.¹³ Objects on view are reminiscent of early collections in both variety and organization. Fossils, shells, taxidermy animals, botanical prints, scientific models and old instruments are among the many items offered for visitors’ consideration. Loose themes are apparent in their arrangement, but interpretation is largely left to the individual viewer. One case, for example, appears to depict the sea: dried starfish and a variety of shells and corals draw the eye. The inclusion of an old camera may be seen to link the sea to leisure and travel. In a similar manner, old field guides and an early microscope form a connection between sea life and scientific study. The presence of a model ram’s head on the top shelf is, at first glance, out of place. Consideration of size and color, however, link this object to many others in the case.

The BioLounge also features several pieces of artwork inspired by the sciences. On one wall is a slotted cabinet filled with illuminated mason jars, each holding a depiction of a unique specimen suspended in liquid. Nearby hang oversize cells; colorful

¹³ Patrick Kociolek, “From the Director,” in *Museum Insights: Newsletter of the University of Colorado Museum of Natural History* (Fall 2009), 2.

screen prints on wood create a visually appealing 3D display. The presence of such works evoke the Italian *studiolo*, a place where art blended with nature and the past met the present. Elsewhere in the room, the undergraduate literary magazine is offered alongside *Smithsonian*, *National Geographic* and *Popular Science* for casual perusal. Mini exhibits on topics of local interest attract the inquisitive but do not dominate the space.

Like the *studiolo*, the BioLounge is a sanctuary; a place for students to relax or chat. By design, it reverses the typical experience of a modern museum-goer: “instead of drawing you to the exhibition and then suggesting you rest, to only then have you leave, the BioLounge invites you to come in, sit down, have a [complimentary] cup of coffee, and relax. Only afterwards (maybe minutes, but perhaps after 2 or 3 visits) do the exhibitions of museum specimens, digital presentations, books, internet science sites, and curiosities beckon visitors to check them out.”¹⁴ This approach has met with great success. Since the BioLounge opened in late 2008, student attendance at the Museum has increased ten-fold; the average length of a visit also rising dramatically (from 15 minutes to over an hour).¹⁵

Feedback on the BioLounge reflects a high level of student satisfaction with the unique setting and displays. The appeal of the space is further evidenced by its frequent use by faculty and graduate students for office hours, recitations, and symposia. The BioLounge is also the site of several collaborative projects and programs. In April 2016, it is slated to host meet and greets between students and panelists presenting at the

¹⁴ Kociolek, “From the Director,” 2.

¹⁵ J. Patrick Kociolek. “The BioLounge at the University of Colorado Museum of Natural History,” in *Engagement and Access: Innovative Approaches for Museums*, ed. Juliee Decker (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 96.

University's renowned Conference on World Affairs. The visual and intellectual appeal of the space combined with its relaxed atmosphere will surely inspire new insight on current issues.

***Cabinet of Curiosities* at the Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota Twin Cities, 24 February – 27 May 2001.**

An exhibit titled *Cabinet of Curiosities* was displayed at the Weisman Art Museum (located on the University of Minnesota's Twin Cities campus) from February to May 2001. Curated by a class of eight students under the direction of contemporary artist Mark Dion, the installation was an explicit effort to recreate the Renaissance experience of collecting and display. A companion publication to the exhibit, which features reflections on research and design, provides a unique glimpse into the process of collecting and arranging diverse objects. The recollections of those involved exemplify the characterization of the cabinet as a laboratory, and reflect its role in the creation of knowledge.

Cabinet of Curiosities consisted of nine linked cases, each inspired by a facet of Renaissance cosmology: the Underworld, the Sea, Air, the Terrestrial Realm, Humankind, the Library or Archive, the Allegory of Vision, the Allegory of Sound and Time, and the Allegory of History. Collectively, these cases held 701 items – each carefully selected from an on-site repository. As per stated intention, the complete Cabinet represented a microcosm of the University of Minnesota and a symbol of “how a

university produces knowledge through things.”¹⁶ Reminiscent of Renaissance pursuits, the work of reassembling the university in a room shed light on hidden links between departments, objects, and people. Careful study of the objects themselves promoted a renewed interest in meaning and context.

As described in the aforementioned publication, an initial step in creating this exhibit was scoping out items of interest, aka curiosities. To this end, students surveyed the storage rooms of campus museums, libraries, and galleries, as well as the research collections of academic departments and the office collections of several faculty members. As illustratively described by Colleen Sheehy, director of education at the Weisman:

“To some extent, our treks around campus to dozens of far-flung buildings, from the West Bank of the Minneapolis campus to St. Paul, recreated in miniature the voyages of discovery that underpinned the Renaissance cabinets... Like the fifteenth and sixteenth century explorers, we came and went relatively quickly, rarely having time to absorb the language, culture, or knowledge of our hosts. Our understanding of the artifacts and specimens in the final exhibition was therefore necessarily very partial in most cases, hardly approaching the level of knowledge of the collection curators – again, very much like the earlier explorers and compilers of cabinets of wonder.”¹⁷

With lists of curiosities in hand, students returned to the classroom to share their adventures and discoveries. In subsequent discussions, each object was linked to one or more overarching cosmological themes. Notably, classification decisions reflected early modes of analytical thought: symbolic relevance and metaphor were placed at a premium. Objects associated with the Underworld, for example, included more than what was

¹⁶ Colleen J. Sheehy, "A Walrus Head in the Art Museum: Mark Dion Digs into the University of Minnesota," in Mark Dion, *Cabinet of Curiosities: Mark Dion and the University as Installation*, ed. Colleen Sheehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 23.

¹⁷ Sheehy, "A Walrus Head in the Art Museum," 16.

literally found on or in the ground (ex. minerals or fossils); Victorian mourning jewelry was added for its association with death. Similarly, a Mimbres pot featuring an image of bat was linked to dark forces.

Each student was responsible for curating a single case for the exhibit. He or she had the final word on which objects would represent the given theme, as well as how these items would be arranged for display. As discussed in the context of early cabinets, organization fosters experimentation and the expression of a point of view. In the present case, the act of arranging enabled one student to explore and express a critique of power. Her cabinet, devoted to Humankind, included an informal “shelf of oppression” which held “a set of action figures from the Battle of the Little Big Horn, a book saved from the Nazis’ burning of a Berlin library in 1933, a device that measured human skulls in the practice of phrenology (which held that Caucasians were superior to people of color), and a tiny pair of silk shoes that had been used to bind Chinese women’s feet.”¹⁸ In general, the arrangement of objects within the exhibit reflected an interest in aesthetics; like its Renaissance predecessors, this Cabinet was intended to cultivate curiosity and wonder through visual impact.

It succeeded. Visitors reportedly spent over an hour examining the cases, “their excitement over what they saw generated animated discussions about the objects and their placement in the cabinets.”¹⁹ The absence of descriptive labels (only lists of the names or titles of items were provided) enabled visitors to create their own experience, pulling meaning from objects where and how they chose. The exhibit even inspired a

¹⁸ Sheehy, “A Walrus Head in the Art Museum,” 17.

¹⁹ Catherine A. Wilkins, “Exploring the Universe Within the University,” in Mark Dion, *Cabinet of Curiosities: Mark Dion and the University as Installation*, ed. Colleen Sheehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 64.

visiting group of elementary schoolers to create their own miniature collections. Themes of their boxes ranged from ‘magic’ to ‘transparent things’ to ‘imagination’ to ‘the senses’. Their letters to head curator Mark Dion, “revealed how deeply they absorbed the lesson of the cabinet.”²⁰ *Cabinet of Curiosities* enabled collectors to explore and present an idea without imposing a rigid structure on their audience. That objects are imbued with multiple meanings and may be viewed from a variety of contexts is, notably, a notion accessible to kids as well as adults.

Haitian Vodou, an exhibit at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, 15 November 2012 – 23 February 2014.

Providing a personalized experience which facilitated the discovery of hidden links was also an objective of a recent exhibit on Haitian Vodou. Displayed at the Canadian Museum of History (in Quebec) from November 2012 to February 2014, this installation sought to present cult objects in such a way as to inspire the reconsideration of an oft vilified religion. By giving a voice to Vodou practitioners and enabling museum-goers to explore new contexts, the exhibit promoted both internal and external communication.

Haitian Vodou was designed according to the IPO-AEF model, a unique approach to exhibit design developed at the Smithsonian. In this model, IPO (ideas-people-objects) refers to visitor preferences for engaging with information. In any exhibit, individuals tend to be drawn to one of the following concepts: ideas (perspectives

²⁰ Sheehy, “A Walrus Head in the Art Museum,” 26.

and interpretations), people (stories, biographies, videos, photographs, and audio clips), or objects (artifacts). Unaided, visitors will find only what they are seeking.

AEF (attract-engage-flip) is the means by which designers create opportunities for discovery. Through the juxtaposition of IPO elements, a guest will be attracted to part of a display and serendipitously ‘flipped’ into a new or unexpected experience. The individual drawn to an artifact (object), for example, would also encounter a video of the collector describing the circumstances of its acquisition (people). Similarly, a visitor interested in an audio clip (people) would see a nearby text panel describing the larger issue at hand (idea). The ‘flip’, or the encounter with the unexpected, is central to the IPO-AEF model and reminiscent of the effect of early cabinets of curiosities.

Haitian Vodou was created to address common misconceptions and stereotypes. To this end, IPO elements were presented in the voices, words, and traditions of the practitioners themselves. As noted by creative developer Jean-François Léger, the role of live interpreters was “limited to offering opportunities for reflection on Vodouism as a spiritual tradition as rich and profound as any other. In essence, interpreters invited visitors to play with concepts and to form connections for themselves.”²¹ At these stations, guests were invited to take part in an image association game which explored Vodou in light of other world religions and a word association game which promoted conversation on the definition of ‘religion’ itself.

As described by Léger in his account of the exhibit’s creation, text-based representations of beliefs, stories, and practices were co-authored with two Haitian curators, one of whom is a Voudou priestess. These accounts were written in the first

²¹ Jean-François Léger, "Shaping a Richer Visitors' Experience: The IPO Interpretative Approach in a Canadian Museum," *Curator* 57, no.1 (Jan.2014), 37.

person and included Creole terms. The resulting perception that Vodouists were speaking directly to guests was furthered by the inclusion of video and audio clips as well as a life-size projection of a religious ceremony. Together, these elements created a context and atmosphere for the cult objects (the focal points of the exhibit). As per the wishes of practitioners, artifacts were not displayed behind glass but encircled by short poles for security. The immediacy of the objects enabled visitors to connect with their energy and presence.

Central to the exhibit was a series of four thresholds, or stages of encounter. Similar in size and each displaying a single object (except for the third), these spaces embodied the effort to attract, engage, and flip the visitor. In the first room, a cross from a secret Bizango society was juxtaposed with a Christian cross lighted on the ceiling. According to Leger, “the dearth of explicit interpretation at the first threshold – there was no explanatory text – presented the central object as a puzzle intended to provoke curiosity, stimulate thought, and encourage reflection. In effect, this threshold acted as a hook, creating curiosity and drawing the visitor onward in search of answers.”²²

Within the second threshold was a Pwen Ibo urn decorated with two human skulls. Posted nearby were the words: “What you see here may not be what we see”. If the first threshold initiated inner dialogue, the second encouraged visitors to open their minds to new perspectives and contexts. By holding an ear to one of the small speakers embedded in the walls, individuals heard the perspective of a Vodouist. The third threshold also employed audio as a means to engage the audience. Here, practitioners

²² Léger, "Shaping a Richer Visitors' Experience," 39.

discussed sharing spiritual objects with the uninitiated, airing concerns about stereotyping.

The final threshold, which led out of the exhibit and into a reflection space, re-centered guests' attention on objects. Around this circular room hung several large mirrors in sculpted frames depicting Vodou symbols. The resulting display, which captured multiple reflections of the visitors' own images, was impactful. As described by one guest, "we were very inspired by the mirrors. We understood it as seeing ourselves within the spirits, which made it very emotionally and spiritually captivating."²³ In effect, this threshold represents the ultimate flip: visitors (people) are integrated into a context (idea or perspective) via objects.

To conclude their experience, visitors were invited into an adjoining room to quietly reflect on what they had witnessed. Moreover, the museum encouraged each guest to respond, via written message, to the Vodouists whose voices and words grounded the display. By incorporating the exchange of knowledge and ideas (again, internally or externally) throughout the exhibit, *Haitian Vodou* achieved its aim of addressing common misconceptions.

²³ Léger, "Shaping a Richer Visitors' Experience," 40.

The Path Forward

The modern examples provided illustrate how the Renaissance experience has been replicated with great success; a question, however, remains: are the design elements, themselves, transferable? Is it feasible (or even desirable) for the majority of modern museums to adopt historical practices?

The BioLounge at the University of Colorado styles itself as a refuge by fostering a relaxed, yet intellectually charged, atmosphere. Visitors are invited to drop by between classes, enjoy a cup of complimentary coffee, and peruse the displays (or not). As the museum is free of charge, it can promote these casual calls and encourage frequent visits. Would visitors be willing to repeatedly pay admission to the lounge? Perhaps not. The intent of the BioLounge, however, should not be discounted by traditional museums. The creation of an attractive, stimulating space clearly appeals to a target audience and could be used to advertise the public museum. In partnership with an independent coffee shop, for instance, a museum might design a cabinet of curiosities inspired lounge to highlight its holdings. Similar mini display spaces are often seen in airports; they provide a refuge from the hustle and bustle (or excruciatingly long layovers) while raising awareness of the museum.

The re-creation of a cabinet of curiosities at the Weisman Art Museum (also a free venue) delivered an eye-opening experience for student curators and guests alike. The presentation of an eclectic mix of objects, sans labels and apparent structure, was intended to captivate and intrigue. At a larger museum, however, might such an

installation also frustrate? Paying guests have certain expectations for their visit; for many, this includes the straight-forward description and contextualization of artifacts. In such a setting, alternate ways of deriving meaning (as embodied by the cabinet) may be most effective as interactive stations, or ‘laboratories’, within a larger exhibit.

New perspectives, encounters, and opportunities for discovery could also be incorporated via the IPO-AEF model. *Haitian Vodou*, an installation which effectively combined cabinet elements with standard modes of display, offers important lessons for the modern museum. Employing the ‘flip’ as a means to introduce individuals to the unexpected, for example, is a useful means of counteracting the static, narrative-based display. Moreover, re-centering objects as focal points of an exhibit promotes the development of new ideas through internal and external communication.

At one time considered the treasure rooms of the elite, cabinets of curiosities evolved into spaces for experimentation and discussion (amongst the privileged). Modern recreations of cabinets provide the general public, from elementary school students to university undergraduates, the opportunity to expand their horizons. As a sanctuary, as a laboratory, and as a forum for conversation, these spaces inspire and engage. The cabinet of curiosities is not a vestige of the past, rather a timeless purveyor of enchantment and the thrill of discovery.

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Appendix: Figures

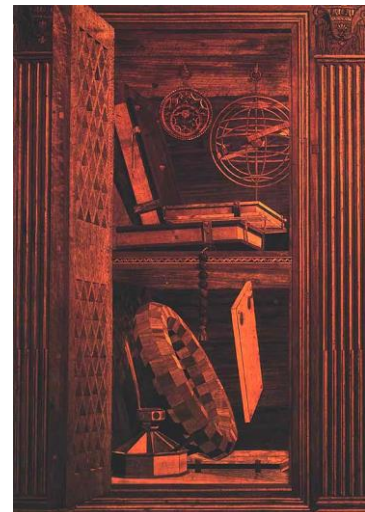


Figure 1 (Left): Studiolo of Federico da Montefeltro (1422-1482) at the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino, Italy. Image from Web Gallery of Art, http://www.wga.hu/html_m/m/maiano/giuliano/studiol2.html. Accessed 3/28/16.

Figure 2 (Right): Detail of a panel.
Image from “Lo Studiolo Di Federico Duca Di Montefeltro,”
<http://digilander.libero.it/McArdal/gnomonarte/Studiolo/Studiolo.htm>.
Accessed 3/28/16.



Figure 3 (Left): Studiolo of Francesco I de' Medici (1541-1587) in Florence, Italy.
 Image from "Studioli," <http://static.digischool.nl/ckv2/hof/Hofcultuur3/studiolo.htm>.
 Accessed 3/28/16.



Figure 4 (Right): Panel depicting the discovery of glass.
 Image from Musei Civici Fiorentini,
http://museicivicifirentini.comune.fi.it/en/palazzovecchio/visitamuseo/studiolo_francesco_i.htm.
 Accessed 3/28/16.



Figure 5: The cabinet of Francesco Calzolari (1566-1586) in Verona, Italy.

Image from "Baroque Museum Tour," <http://www.zymoglyphic.org/exhibits/baroquemuseums.html>. Accessed 3/28/16.

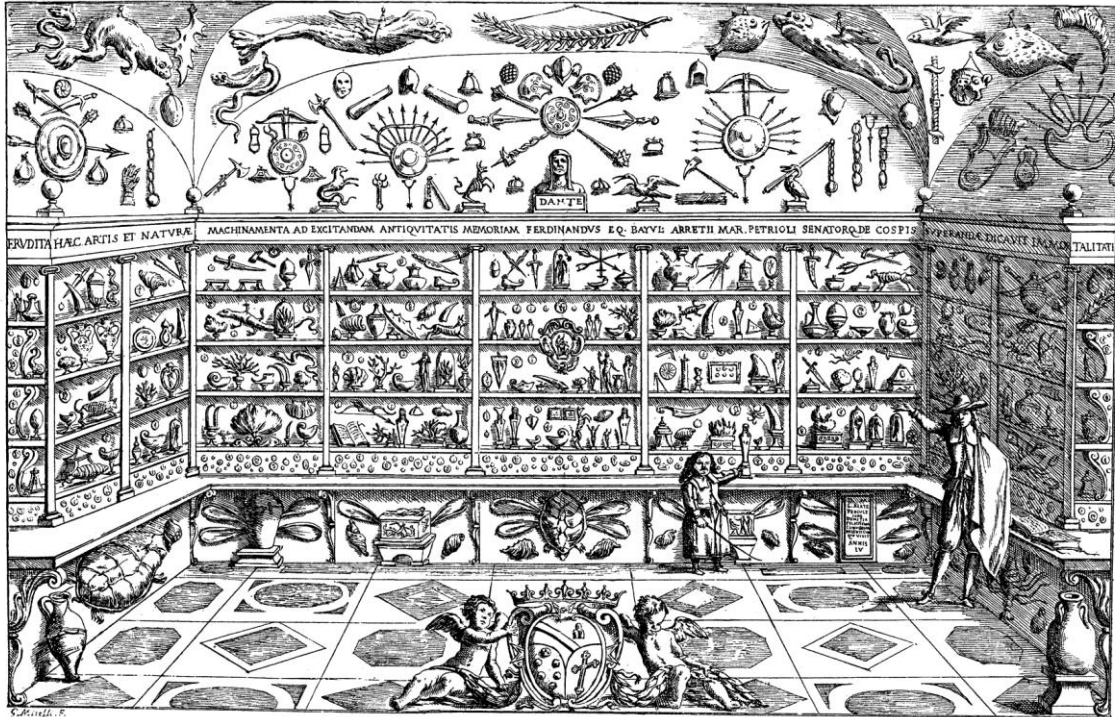


Figure 6: The cabinet of Ferdinando Cospi (1606-1686) in Bologna, Italy.

Image from "Baroque Museum Tour," <http://www.zymoglyphic.org/exhibits/baroquemuseums.html>.

Accessed. 3/28/16



Figure 7: The cabinet of Ferrante Imperato (1550-1625) in Naples, Italy.

Image from "The World of the Habsburgs," <http://www.habsburger.net/en/media/museum-ferrante-imperato-1599?>

Accessed 3/28/16.